

The Ohio State University Commencement Speech

December 11, 2011

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Thank you for this most prestigious honor of addressing you today, I am humbled and overwhelmed! I have been blessed to receive many honors during my lifetime but this is one of the best.

Thank you to President Gee, members of the Board of Trustees, Provost Alutto, our distinguished honorees and guests, administrative leaders, accomplished faculty members, proud families and friends and especially – the graduates. Congratulations on this wonderful day! It is my greatest honor to share this milestone with all of you.

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When Dr. Gee asked me to speak to all of you today, I was deeply honored. I truly believe that not only is The Ohio State University one of the finest universities in the country, but it also has one of the nation's greatest leaders in Dr. E. Gordon Gee who – as many of you may be aware - is known for his Top 10 lists. So on behalf of all of you students, I took the liberty of crafting my own lists as to why we all think Gordon Gee is such a great leader for Ohio State – here goes the Top 5 reasons since we don't have time for 10.

#5... He doesn't take himself too seriously.

- anyone that refers to himself as Orville Redenbacher clearly doesn't!

#4... He meets his students where they are - social media.

- I assure you, he reads his tweets, some of which are quite funny.

- he told me someone once tweeted him, "Whenever I see President Gee on campus, I feel like I've spotted the Keebler Elf and get extremely excited."

#3...He knows how to make the best out of every situation

- just ask the Little Sisters of the Poor!
- look at what came from that situation - turned a gaffe into a wonderful story and partnership that is ongoing. Last year was their largest fundraising year ever thanks to Dr. Gee.

#2...He knows the state of Ohio inside and out.

- spends his summer touring each county in Ohio - meeting supporters of Ohio State, and citizens of Ohio.
- ask him how to milk a cow in his bow tie!

#1... He makes you, the students, his number one priority!

-as a student at Ohio State, it's a guarantee that you will see your President, and you will see him often.

-makes an effort to connect with students as often as possible.

Applause for Dr. Gee . . .

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I wanted to do this list not only to have some fun, but more importantly to illustrate my most central, most integral point in my remarks today: the power of innovation and creativity. Who better to illustrate this point than the dynamic, innovative E. Gordon Gee?

A few years ago, Time Magazine named him the #1 college President in America. Dr. Gee is the only college President who will answer every email, phone call, and letter. Not only does this send a message that

you are important, but he has managed to take the largest university in America and personalize it. (He recognizes the importance of “How do you grow big and still stay small?”) Think about this commitment . . . sometimes a thousand communications a week. He also understands the complexity, the power, and responsibility of being one of the most influential people in the state of Ohio. He has helped in developing a partnership with Battelle, Chemical Abstracts, and Ohio State to work together collaboratively on new and innovative research projects by leveraging the fact that OSU is considered by some to be the largest research university in the country. He is an excellent example of an innovative leader.

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In the 1870s, we had an agricultural-based economy. In the 1930s, the economy shifted into an industrial economy and then the onset of mass production. According to Richard Florida – a futurist who has authored

several books – “for the last several years, we have now entered into the knowledge/innovation economy. Mr. Florida cites that this era, the era of knowledge and innovation, will be bigger than either of the prior eras.”

This is a very exciting time to be graduates because of the limitless opportunities to be innovative. Let me say that again: *limitless* opportunities for innovation. The knowledge/innovation sector of the economy currently represents 40% GDP with an unemployment rate of less than 5%. So what does all that mean?

It means that those individuals who are willing to think outside of the box, embrace change, and recognize opportunities will be game changers. These individuals who can see the invisible and do the impossible will be our future leaders.

Let me explain what I mean with a few examples:

Our very own Les Wexner, the President of the OSU Board of Trustees, is one of the best visionaries of our time. When I worked for him at the Limited, Les, myself, and several other merchants went to San Francisco to visit the owner of three little lingerie stores called Victoria's Secret. All of us were shaking our heads wondering why we were there - but not Les. He walked around the store studying every garment and asking the owner numerous questions. The rest of us were very puzzled. The Limited was known for its sportswear, so why were we in this lingerie store?

On the way back to Columbus, Les told us that he wanted to purchase the small lingerie stores. When we asked why, he told us that no one was selling fun lingerie to young customers and that within 20 years Victoria's Secret would be the #1 lingerie brand in the country. What a profound statement, but he was absolutely right. Les saw the invisible - a market for women's underwear - and did the impossible. He led

Victoria's Secret to becoming the #1 lingerie brand worldwide, generating over \$6 billion in sales today.

And let's talk about Howard Schultz who purchased a few small coffee shops in Seattle called Starbucks - you may have heard of it? Howard believed there was a better way to deliver quality coffee. Today people go to Starbucks for a wide variety of coffees and other beverages.

There are now thousands of Starbucks stores all over the world. I can remember when my friends fixed coffee at their homes every morning.

Now they grab coffee on their way to work. Recognizing that most of the store sales were in the morning, Shultz challenged his team to create a new drink that would sell after people had their coffee - thus the creation of the Frappuccino, which now generates over a billion dollars for Starbucks. Howard Shultz saw the invisible and did the impossible. He took a simple idea - a morning cup of coffee - and, well, now it seems there is a Starbucks on every corner. He made it part of our world.

There are countless examples of companies started or developed by visionaries: Google, Facebook, ESPN, The Big Ten Network, Wendy's and the best known –Apple. Steve Jobs - what an amazing visionary. He had an ability to see what did not exist - what the customer might want - and so often, he was right. He took the simple concept of listening to music, and made it easier and more convenient for the customer. The creation of the I-Pod made the CD player extinct. Do any of you remember owning a Walkman? The creation of the I-Phone rocked the cell phone world. And the I-Pad has been nothing short of spectacular. The Apple stores are the best performing retail spaces in the world. Steve Jobs truly could see the invisible and do the impossible. And, in doing so, he changed our global landscape.

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You may be asking yourself what is the invisible in your world. Most great successes originate from delivering a product or a service that already exists in a simpler fashion, providing a better environment, and often times being more efficient.

Lingerie has always existed, but Victoria's Secret made it more appealing for its customers. Coffee has been around for centuries, but Starbucks created a new way to drink coffee, and expanded the customer's choices for coffee drinks like a latte, espresso, frappuccino, etc. We have always had music available to us, as well as phones, but Apple made the experience better. The magic is in taking a daily task and making it better, making it more appealing to the customer.

Imagine the possibility of taking a simple object or concept, and changing the landscape for the world. A morning cup of coffee, downloading an MP3 music file, buying underwear.... and, of course....cookies.

Now you may think that these examples are out of reach for you, so allow me to give you yet another example.

Chocolate chip cookies were created in 1929, so that item has been here for over 80 years. My idea was to create a gourmet cookie, targeting people who didn't have time to bake. Not only did we create cookies with chocolate chips and chunks but I quickly recognized that our iced cutout cookies were the #1 item people purchased because they tasted great, came in seasonal shapes, no one had time to make them, and no one else sold them. Again, a simple product - an iced cookie. We were the first cookie company in America to sell seasonal iced cutout cookies. We also were the first cookie company to sell cookies in seasonal gift packages, to sell individually wrapped cookies, the first to have a gift catalog, and the first to launch a website.

Cheryl & Co. was also the most profitable cookie company in America when I sold it in 2005 and had the highest customer loyalty in the industry.

My 'Invisible' was to build a successful cookie company and my 'impossible' was to create a company that was doing more than \$50,000,000 in sales at the time when I retired as president.

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My challenge to all of you is to first find what you love to do--then do great work and don't settle. When I started my company, my parents were not pleased with my decision to leave my job, which was providing me with a steady income. They were afraid for me, and they did not believe anyone would purchase my cookies.

Steve Jobs said it best – “Don’t let the noise of others opinions drown out your inner voice, your heart, or your intuition” (even if it’s the voice of your parents and family). I urge you to find your passion and not to lose faith if you can’t find it right away – keep looking. And when you do find your passion, don’t give up during the bad times. Rely on your creativity to pull you through those darkest hours. I remember when Mrs. Fields was building more stores and paying more rent per square foot than we could afford. It was depressing and frustrating because they had more money at the time and could afford to pay more rent. But I learned that having less money was actually a real blessing because it forced me to be creative and leverage the resources I had available to me at the time.

Thinking out of the box - we changed the concept of our store from a cookie store, Cheryl’s Cookies, to Cheryl & Co. a gourmet cookie gift store. The mall developers loved our concept and were willing to give us a prime location at the Ross Park Mall in Pittsburgh for \$30 per

square foot versus the Mrs. Fields location which was not as good and was paying over \$60 per square foot. Not only were we paying half as much rent, but the store was our first million dollar store which was three times more than what the Mrs. Fields store had generated.

Because of our focus on innovation to re-conceptualize the store, we out-performed Mrs. Fields and every other competitor from that point forward. Years later Mrs. Fields declared bankruptcy partly due to their higher rent costs. I learned a very valuable lesson – that throwing money at the problem oftentimes only masks the problem. Thinking outside the box and using creativity was the only real answer to help solve the problem.

My last example today is one of my favorites. Like many other start up companies, we were strategically thinking about how to grow our sales channels. One of our targets was the airline industry because their customer profile was similar to Cheryl's and their busy times were complimentary to our peak times. Our challenge was – how do you get

the attention of any of the buyers of the airlines since everyone else wanted their business too? Again, since we had limited resources and could not afford a marketing agency, we created an innovative marketing campaign on our own. We decided to fill the barf bags that you find on most planes with Cheryl's Cookies and print on each bag – "If you are going to toss your cookies, toss the very best!" We then started sending them to all of the airline buyers – and we definitely caught their attention! They started calling us! Our barf bag created such a buzz in the industry that we actually got 3 airlines to purchase our cookies (USAir, Delta & American) which represented over \$5 million in sales – because of an innovative marketing idea.

To close, I want to urge all of you to find your 'invisible'

- found a company
- become a president
- serve as a missionary
- invent the next I-phone

Find your invisible and do the impossible.

Whatever you choose to do -- do it with passion and intensity.

Remember: this is your time--

limitless opportunity for innovation awaits you.

Thank you all and congratulations.